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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the use of Japanese authentic texts in the Japanese second language classroom is superior to using texts written for pedagogical purposes. Authentic texts are very useful teaching tools, even for beginners. They are more interesting, because they have been written for a communicative purpose and their content promotes the desire to acquire greater fluency. Authentic texts also motivate the learner to learn to read Japanese characters from the beginning of instruction. The paper discusses the learning of Japanese orthography. Communicative philosophy assumes that every dimension of learning should be appropriate to students needs, expectations, and experiences on the one hand and the realities of communication in the target language on the other. This can be realized through the use of authentic texts. (Contains 41 references.) (KFT)

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An argument for the use of authentic texts with beginners of Japanese as a foreign language

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An argument for the use of authentic texts with beginners of Japanese as a foreign fanguage

Karen Ruddock

1 Introduction

Arguments in favour of using authentic texts in language teaching are based on the value inherent in the nature of an authentic text. Little et al. (1989, p.24) argue that authentic texts are more interesting than texts written for pedagogical purposes because they have been written for a communicative purpose; that they are more likely to have acquisition-promoting content than invented texts because they revolve around content rather than form; and that to some extent they can provide an equivalent to the "language bath" in which the first language learner is immersed from birth. Beeching (1982) argues that authentic texts represent language in use, are learner-oriented, and enhance motivation because the material is lively, realistic, and patently relevant. Authentic materials are better for "learning", because "learning" materials can help learners move towards learner autonomy (Lee 1996, p.168), as opposed to "practice" materials, which are largely remedial and are more geared to learners' practice needs. Guiding learners towards autonomy in language use must be the main objective of any language course, and learners develop capacities that make them autonomous partly through experiential learning (see Little 1998). The use of authentic texts provides an opportunity for such experiential learning and Galloway (1997, p.277) has written that "it is precisely through this contact with the unknown, through the investment of thought in the processes of conflict resolution, that personally relevant sense making strategies can be developed".

In the teaching of Japanese, authentic texts are not usually employed until intermediate level. There are plenty of books available for the purpose of improving the reading skills of intermediate and advanced learners. These include books that focus on the development of strategies for comprehension (e.g. Kanzaki and Nakanishi 1995, Miura and Oka 1998, Miura and Sakamoto 1997) or are designed to increase reading proficiency in specific areas

(e.g. Ashby 1994, Yamamoto et al. 1987). However, because the assumption is that authentic texts are too difficult for beginners, and therefore inaccessible to them, guidelines are generally not available for those who do not have a minimum level of competence. The one book available for beginners (Aihara 1992), which in the author's words "systematically teaches one how to understand the grammatical structure of Japanese for the specific purposes of reading comprehension", is romanized, which removes the examples from the realm of authenticity.

Historically, the Japanese language was seen as belonging to the elite, a luxury for which only members of the upper classes had sufficient time and resources. Today it is seen as belonging only to those learners who have progressed to intermediate level, so that ownership of authentic Japanese is denied to beginners, natives as well as non-natives.

2 Japanese orthography in context

People have protested for the past few hundred years about the difficulties of Japanese orthography, and many have argued for script reform of various descriptions based on arguments such as the waste of time involved in memorizing kanji, the greater accessibility of a kana-only script to the general populace, or the abolition of clumsy foreign borrowing (Twine 1983, p.116). The early Christian missionaries described Japanese as an invention of the devil, designed to prevent the spread of the gospel. Japanese orthography is often characterized as the most complex writing system in use anywhere in the world. Smith (1996) points out that no other writing system has been criticized as much as Japanese, thanks to its multiscriptal nature and the inordinate complexities of the kanji script. However, she also cites the highly literate and globally successful nature of modern Japanese society as proof of the functional efficiency of its writing system. The difficulties of written Japanese (which are certainly real) are often exaggerated (Kaiser 1993 p.109).

There are three basic scripts in Japanese, one morphographic (kanji) and two phonographic (hiragana and katakana, known together as kana, in which each character represents the sound of one syllable). There are about 3,000 commonly used kanji characters and 46 characters in each of the kana systems. Kanji and kana are used for functionally different purposes and contextual clues always play a role in the occurrence of the different scripts. This means that the Japanese writing system offers particularly clear opportunities for marking structural divisions (Backhouse 1984), a feature clearly useful when looking at authentic written texts. Most nouns, verb roots and

adjectives are represented by kanji, and the differentiation of homophones made possible by kanji allows different words to be formally identical; for example, a typical small Japanese dictionary lists eleven words pronounced *kikoo*. Japanese kanji represent more than one morpheme and therefore have no consistent phonetic value. Verb and adjective endings indicating tense and auxiliary verbs and particles are written in hiragana. Hiragana are also sometimes used to represent the pronunciation of kanji, in which case they are referred to as furigana; these overcome the problem of presenting an authentic text full of new words in kanji, for which the learner would have no idea of pronunciation without first being told. Adverbs can be written in either kanji or kana. Katakana characters are used chiefly for words of foreign origin. Arabic numerals may be used instead of kanji numerals when writing is done in the horizontal style, and Roman capitals are used to describe some borrowed words, e.g., OL "office girl" (secretary) or 3DK "having three rooms plus a dining room-cum-kitchen".

There are no spaces between words, and there is no distinction analogous to that between upper and lower case letters; but because there are strict conventions used in the choice of script it is quite possible to determine where one word ends and the next begins.

3 Learning Japanese orthography

A cursory examination of learner texts for beginners of Japanese as a foreign language reveals that without exception they (i) neither use nor include authentic texts, (ii) instead use texts specially written for didactic purposes, and (iii) are characterized by artificial written language consisting of romaji, or kana where kanji would normally be used, and artificially produced spaces between words. This is a wasteful process as the majority of words written will never again be seen in that form, once the transition stage is terminated (Steinberg and Oka 1978).

Steinberg et al. (1977) point out that the common assumption that "real Japanese" is too difficult for beginners has no basis in scientific research. Still, just as with learners of Japanese as a foreign language, it is said that in the case of Japanese children learning to read it is better to introduce kanji after a certain threshold of competence has been reached, so that textbooks tend to limit reading to what learners are able to write (Steinberg 1995, p.200) and children as well as foreigners learn an inauthentic written form.

There is evidence in fact for decreased comprehension in kana-only scripts for first language learners (Hayashi and Hayashi 1991), and although kana are superior to kanji in terms of access to phonemic codes, so that kanji

take longer to read, children also learn kanji words more quickly than they do individual kana words even when kanji verbs and adjectives are involved (Steinberg and Oka 1978, Steinberg 1995, p.201). Along with other researchers (e.g., Fukuzawa 1976, Saito 1981), Steinberg and Oka conclude that the potent variable is meaningfulness, and that it is of such great importance that its effects overpower those of length and perceptual complexity. This is partly because much of the written language uses Sino-Japanese words (words borrowed from Chinese hundreds of years ago), which are not used in every day speech, so that the meanings of such words are grasped faster and more accurately when written in kanji than in phonetic scripts (Taylor and Park 1995, p.185). If, as these studies suggest, the words and not the syllables carry the meaning in Japanese, then that is another reason for using authentic written texts in Japanese.

While Jorden and Chaplin (1976, p.xii) point out that the study of material that has been edited for the foreigner also "delays the achievement of competence in reading *real* Japanese", they argue that beginning reading is taught most efficiently by using material that is grammatically and lexically familiar: they see grammatical and lexical control as a prerequisite for beginning reading. They argue that this helps students to learn to read as opposed to decode with constant dependence on dictionaries (Jorden and Chaplin 1976, p.xi). While literacy partly involves creating meaning from available cues, and applying that understanding to what is already known, it is also partly the ability to decode those cues in the first place (Boccino 1999, p.xiii). While the ultimate goal is obviously to learn how to read, in the meantime, a more short-term but worthwhile goal must surely be to train learners in the art of decoding. If learners read only what is familiar and what they comprehend, they will forever be barred from the more difficult material they are likely to encounter later on. Even in the very earliest stages of learning, access to the lexicon is of vital importance to learners in the target language community who want to know what is going on around them. The learners I teach want to know what is in the newspaper every day. There are, however, many learners who do not know how to access either the meaning or the pronunciation of unknown Japanese characters and vocabulary because they do not know how to access information from material which is unfamiliar.

Bar-Lev (1983), who teaches the reading of Hebrew using hieroglyphics, claims that emphasis on structural detail offers a magnificent opportunity in languages such as Hebrew and Japanese, not only to broaden and deepen the input the learner receives, but also to give a more profound, better rounded definition to the language skills and language learning skills the

learner has acquired. Bar-Lev's most important single finding is that regular adult text in a language that does not use the Roman alphabet can be comprehended after limited study. He contends that learners who have begun with this kind of reading-based approach can be expected to make with ease the transition to fluent reading that few students make at all.

4 The use of authentic texts with beginners

Students taking the degree course in Business Studies and Japanese at Trinity College Dublin are given authentic text on the first day of their Japanese language learning experience. With no previous exposure to the Japanese language, they are able to distinguish five different types of script, used in Japanese – kanji, katakana, hiragana, romaji and arabic numerals (or universal script including punctuation). Although they cannot name all of them, they are well able to divide the scripts into five categories such as "complex ones", "futuristic looking ones", "curvy-wurvy ones", Roman letters, and numbers.

When provided with a chart of the katakana syllabary with accompanying romanization (providing symbol to sound correspondence), learners are able to decipher many katakana words and quickly become accustomed to the sound system of Japanese. The consistency of character-to-sound correspondence in Japanese makes the language particularly suited to such an activity. In class, learners choose magazines in areas in which they are interested, and are asked to make vocabulary lists constructed from katakana. They are challenged to activate world knowledge they already have, and thus to construct the conditions for further learning, as Little et al. (1989, p.25) argue. Galloway has also pointed out that "tasks which encourage the use of the known for guessing have great potential for fostering in readers a sense of moderate risk and a faith in their own capabilities" (1997 p.282).

Learners can use their knowledge of English to infer meanings from most of the katakana loan words; for example, when they read "コンピュータ" they come up with "konpyuutaa", and as they produce the sounds this becomes "computer". Some of these words require learners to use world knowledge also. Thus "イメージアップ" produces "imeejiappu" and subsequently "image-up", which means to improve one's image. It doesn't matter that word meanings often change when words are borrowed, that two-word English phrases may be reduced to single words in Japanese, or that the nuances of words may change. These things in themselves become interesting foci for study.

Students can decode much information from material such as travel brochures and menus, which contain a lot of katakana vocabulary. They can read a Moss Burger (Japanese equivalent of McDonalds) menu on their first day. They can read picture captions in fashion and sports magazines, which use lots of katakana vocabulary, and tell me how much designer bags cost in a magazine specializing in designer goods. By the third week, without access to the syllabary, they are able to look at a travel brochure advertising somewhere abroad and answer comprehension questions (in English) related to hotel names, place names, tour possibilities, costs, and accompanying services.

By analysing many katakana words, it is also possible for learners to construct rules for the comprehension of katakana – rules that help then to access more difficult words when they encounter them. Although Jorden and Chaplin (1976), in a textbook designed to teach adult learners to read, outline these rules in full, their exploration is neither encouraged nor explained in most classrooms, and guides and texts now available which deal with katakana merely provide endless lists of more vocabulary to be learned As vocabulary with an origin in English constitutes 10% of the lexicon of a standard Japanese dictionary (Honna 1995, p.45), and as English is the source of most scientific and technical loan words, it is of the utmost importance for learners to acquire transliteration rules at the earliest stage of learning. A knowledge of such rules will save much time in the later stages, and learners enjoy discovering that there is so much that is so familiar, in this seemingly unfamiliar language.

Decoding and learning to read sentence structure is also an important skill. Determining sentence patterns, learning how to identify subordinate clauses, and grasping their relation to the major elements, as described by Aihara (1992), are related to this. The development of such skills can begin with practice in understanding the use of particles, which are often a source of grief and aggravation to learners as well as instructors (Tanaka 1994, p.55). Using only particles, a learner can identify semantic relations between words, the topic, or the relationship between clauses in a piece of text, to give just three examples (for comprehensive discussion of particles, see Chino 1991). The positive correlation between proficiency in Japanese and dependence on Japanese case-marking cues demonstrated by Sasaki (1994) makes this a worthwhile activity. The fact that particles are easy to identify is helpful (two of the most common, the case particles *he* and *o*, are written with unique graphemes and thus cannot be confused with anything else). In their third week of Japanese, when given a recipe for *okonomiyake* with furigana and plenty of katakana vocabulary, learners were able to pick out sen-

tence topics, and with appropriate tasks to guide them (e.g., "What kind of pancake is *okonomiyake*?") they could identify noun modification .

If they are given a text in which kanji are also represented phonetically with the use of furigana, students can discover that when kanji appear in compounds they are read differently from when they appear in place names or singly followed by okurigana. Thus in the same text they can distinguish between "分ける" where "分" is read "wa", and "五分" where "分" is read "fun". This is useful in helping learners to deduce rules for the reading of kanji.

Kanji present the most serious difficulty in the teaching of Japanese reading (Okazaki and Suzuki 1993, p.28). It is therefore imperative that learners be equipped with the ability to handle kanji. By arranging kanji into groups based on structural criteria learners can be equipped with the ability to guess meanings of unknown kanji (ibid., p.29).

Kanji can be separated according to their radicals (constituent elements), according to their meaning or their relative position (which tells the learner where to look for the meaning). Where the radical "忄" meaning "heart" is found, for example, the character will usually be associated with the mind or the emotions, "言" meaning "speak" with something verbal, or "金" meaning "money" or "metal" with something related to metal. On their first day of kanji study students learn that "口" represents "mouth", that "木" is tree and that "日" is the sun or the day. It is not difficult for them then to find all the kanji in a particular text which have these radicals as component parts. Just working with radicals helps them to memorize the kanji (Hadamitzky and Spahn 1981, p.59), so that practice in identifying radicals is a useful activity in itself. A series of experiments conducted by Chen and Allport 1995) on skilled readers of Chinese demonstrated selective attentional bias to the components of characters, which is a further argument for training learners to be sensitive to radicals.

When adult learners approach the study of kanji with a wealth of previous learning experience, they necessarily do so in a different way to that of Japanese children, and "the key to successful study of kanji lies not in rote learning, as favored by the Japanese themselves, but in breaking down the barrier of unfamiliarity" (Henshall 1988, p.ix). Henshall (ibid., pp.xiii–xxiii) discusses an etymological approach where each character is broken down into its constituent elements, which are then reconstructed to create the overall meaning of a particular character. Learners can create new, even original kanji from the radicals of the ones they are given, and this encourages them to think about meaning and provides valuable insight into the way that kanji are constructed.

Heisig (1977, p.7) argues for the use of imaginative memory, something that might be particularly useful for the majority of kanji which are used for their phonetic value (learners in my class often separate kanji and their radicals according to their own creative systems). Heisig contends that if learners can discover the basic elements in the characters and assign to each its own image, fusing them together to form other images, an impasse created by purely visual memory might be overcome. This is borne out by students' reports to the effect that making up stories helps them to remember how to write kanji and how to remember their meanings and readings. Examples include the following:

> "薬" Eating sweets you find in the grass and the trees makes you sick (picture) and need medicine (meaning). You *kusuri* (curse) (*kun* reading) because the doctor gives you "yaku" (yucky) medicine (*on* reading).

> "作る". This is a man with a saw (picture). Saw in Icelandic is *saga* so that is how I remember the *on* reading. Then the kun is kind of the sound you get when you are sawing, "tsuku, tsuku, tsuku-ru".

Although Wang and Thomas (1992) report that supplying learners with mnemonically derived images did not produce any long-term advantages for the retention of vocabulary items, they point out that they may be more effective when, as outlined above, learners create the mnemonic image themselves.

There is every reason to encourage learners to separate kanji in this way. Experiments conducted by Flaherty (1994) suggest that the multiple readings of Japanese kanji induce a more direct visual-to-meaning association in terms of cognitive processing than either the Roman alphabet or Chinese hanji. There are two reasons for this. First, because there are many homonyms in Japanese the phonological code is not very helpful; and secondly, the existence of multiple readings of characters which change depending on the compound noun in which they appear, means that the reading of a single character does not help in accessing the meaning, especially as single characters are far more common as compound nouns than as single nouns.

In a target culture as different as Japan is for English speakers, heightened cross-cultural awareness is especially important. Authentic texts represent a way of incorporating cultural education with reading instruction (Evans and Gonzales 1993), and the analysis of kanji in itself necessarily introduces a sociocultural component into the classroom. The character in the morpheme "flow" for example is made up of the elements "full", "river" and

"water". A full river flows. This kind of activity becomes even more interesting when one starts to look at compound nouns. When "flow" is combined with "association" we arrive at "exchange", when it's a "going flow" we have a "fashion" or a "trend", a "woman" "flowing" is female.

Learners not yet proficient in basic Japanese have been very positive in their comments concerning the use of authentic texts in their study of kanji. The following comments pertain to a particular assignment which involved extensive research in a particular genre (chosen by the learners) of Japanese:

> "Seeing the kanji in words helps me remember the readings and increase my vocabulary."
>
> "Looking up kanji in the dictionary helped me to memorize the different radicals and that is very good for my kanji understanding."
>
> "I learned how to use radicals, not only as a means to look up a kanji, but also in order to derive pronunciation and meaning."
>
> "I find it interesting to see whether my initial guess of the meaning turns out to be right when I look it up."
>
> "I found this book very interesting and finding kanji in a different environment."
>
> "I am capable of recognizing the radicals and looking up the kanji in record times."
>
> "Using a Japanese magazine for my assignment has made me realize the importance of learning kanji, and its importance in every day Japanese life."

These comments come from learners who initially showed some resistance to this kind of learning. The use of lots of authentic materials that don't seem immediately accessible, can be threatening to learners from a traditional language learning background, but careful explanation, guidance and perseverance produces positive feedback.

5 Concluding remarks

Learners of Japanese who go to live in Japan will find it much less humiliating if they are accustomed to handling authentic texts; and if they are not, they will always be asking for explanations. Without access to the written language, they will have no access to, for example, restaurant menus,

banking, and reading their own electricity bills. Little et al. (1994 p.23) argue that the communicative approach "is concerned that in every dimension the course of learning should be appropriate to the students' needs, expectations and experiences on the one hand and to the realities of communication in the target language community on the other." This can only be realized within an authentic context, and I would argue that it is especially important in Japanese, where the text of the real world is too often far removed from text likely to be encountered in a beginners' classroom. In relation to the use of authentic texts, my students say that they feel connected to Japan and Japanese culture, even though they have never been there. They say they know there is a real world out there that one day they will have to deal with, and they say they want to feel that they are addressing this real world, in which they are also adamant that they will be full participants.

There is no reason to assume that "authentic" should mean something different for beginners of Japanese, or that authentic texts should have a different value when they are written in Japanese. The nature of the script used by a particular language is irrelevant in the light of arguments in favour of authenticity. By failing to use authentic texts we may actually contribute to a fear of Japanese script amongst learners, and to a notion that it is impenetrable by non-natives. By even contemplating the alternative, we are subscribing to the exclusive idea that is "almost an article of faith among Japanese that Japanese is unique, not in the way that all other languages are unique, but uniquely unique, ultimately different from all others and something that cannot be grasped by foreigners" (Van Wolferen 1993, p.18; see also Kindaichi 1978).

Common sense might suggest that we should leave Japanese authentic texts aside when teaching beginners. But as Richards (1990, p.95) so sensibly points out, the good teacher does not rely on common sense but has a comprehensive theory of the nature of what he or she is teaching and refers to *this* when planning.

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